Commentary

Fear of the Unknown

E. R. W. FOX, MD, *Coeur d'Alene, Idaho*

We humanoids, as we walk the face of the earth, are filled with fear. Right now there are two words in the English language, "nuclear" and "x-ray," that translate into that one word: "fear."

Newspapers, the radio, TV and even movies are guilty of spreading fear of these intangibles. These elements in our daily life that we can't see, smell, feel or touch are gristmill stuff for the media. Oddly, from childhood on, it is our human nature to enjoy being scared.

When Dad throws his little one up in the air, then to be safely caught, the child says, "Do it again, Daddy!" I contend the giggle comes not from being thrown in the air, but from being safely caught.

We read those scary headlines and watch those bloodcurdling horror movies because they take us to frightening heights, and then allow us to come back to the warm and cozy little world we live in.

There is an unreasonableness in so many of our fears. Mary Jones refuses a mammogram because, as she so bluntly puts it, "I don't want no x-ray on my boobs — x-rays cause cancer." Yet she smokes two packs of cigarettes a day. With her fingers she can feel the plump roundness of the cigarette, then she can see the smoke and smell the fragrance, and as she inhales she gets that indefinable nicotine surge. Surely, anything that visible, that tangible, that pleasant cannot be harmful.

In so many ways we are like Mary, mixed-up kids with the wrong priorities. In the wing of our hospital where there is a sign "Nuclear Medicine Department," it is amusing to see people slinking along on the side of the corridor farthest from that area, fearing "nuclear" contamination if they get too close. People will drive miles out of their way to avoid passing anywhere near the Hanford Nuclear Reservation.

In their ignorance they fail to realize that nuclear medicine is a magnificent tool for unlocking many mysteries of clinical medicine, helping to save lives each day. There are even groups of well-meaning physicians who will march together, preaching against all those nuclear evils, adding to the public hysteria. You have probably noticed that the original name of nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) scanning has been quietly changed to the less terrifying magnetic resonance imaging (MRI).

It is popular today to raise our voices against the transportation and storage of hazardous wastes, which to everyone means "nuclear waste." Our mayors rise in wrath, saying, "We shall not let those nuclear trucks come through our town!" and our governors cry out, "Never will we allow those Easterners to dump their hazardous materials in our state!"

Intelligent, supposedly well-informed people ignore or choose not to accept the fact given to us by our government's Office of Technology Assessment that gasoline trucks, not nuclear waste transports, are involved in accidents that result in more deaths and damages than all the other hazardous materials accidents combined. Last year there were 225 tanker rollovers, with 88 of them resulting in fatalities. Yet we welcome those semi-trailers so that we, in turn, can fill our tanks and join the highway turmoil that claims 50,000 lives each year. To my knowledge, here in America there is no recorded death attributable to the nuclear energy industry.

Recently the press has come upon another invisible, intangible monster that is stealthily creeping up on us — radon. We are told that this deadly substance, a degradation product of plutonium, is right there in the soil beneath our homes, just waiting to seep through the cracks in the foundation. We are frightened, knowing that even within the walls of our private castles we cannot escape the threat of irradiation.

Now these fears have stalked into our kitchens. Some months ago I wrote in this journal about Maizie's problem of flatulence induced by the consumption of beans and other lentils. I made the jocular observation that some research work had demonstrated that cobalt radiation of the can of beans might reduce the production of flatus and thereby relieve Maizie's distress. At the same time, I opined that such a practice was not likely to meet with public approval. In this I was not disappointed: several readers expressed outrage at such an idiotic idea.

It comes as a happy surprise to me that the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has recently given the go-ahead to the administration of low doses of irradiation to certain types of food in order to eliminate insects, bacteria, parasites from fruits, vegetables, pork and seafoods. The justification for the use of this method is based on the evidence that irradiation kills trichina in pork, salmonella in fish and chicken, and reduces grain spoilage.

(Fox ERW: Fear of the unknown. West J Med 1987 Jun; 146:759-760)

Dr Fox is in private practice in Coeur d'Alene and is the Special Editor for Idaho.
Reprint requests to E. R. W. Fox, MD, 1401 E Lakeshore Dr, Coeur d'Alene, ID 83814.

There has already been an outcry from opponents who fear those invisible, intangible rays, whether they be x-ray, nuclear or cobalt 60. The FDA, on the other hand, is in the unusual position of recommending the use of a dangerous and potentially lethal modality for the common good.

Somehow these sincere critics of irradiation must be convinced that many of their fears are unfounded. Perhaps they will take some comfort in knowing that food so treated does not become radioactive and that there is no documented evidence of a carcinogenic effect. They must also be told that at the present time 60% of exported wheat is spoiled before it reaches the famine-stricken areas, a tragedy preventable by irradiation.

We humanoids enjoy hazardous recreational chemicals such as cigarettes, alcohol and marijuana because we can hold them in our hand, sip them from a glass or inhale their fumes into our lungs.

Perversely, while we ignore the great good that comes to us from x-ray and nuclear energy, we live in constant fear of them. The fear of the unknown. Senseless humanoid fear.